

# Md. Pays a Holiday Checkup on Child Sex Offenders

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For many registered child sex offenders in Maryland tonight, answering the doorbell might be less likely to reveal a ghost or goblin than a police officer. And it won't be a costume.

In an operation that began last night, the state Division of Parole and Probation and local law enforcement agencies planned to knock on the door of every convicted child sex offender under court supervision in Maryland. The agents will try to ensure that about 2,000 people are following a set of Halloween rules for supervised sex offenders:

Porch lights off, curtains closed and signs reading "No Candy" posted within sight of every trick-or-treater. The effort marks the only special statewide sweep of sex offenders on the calendar.

"Halloween is not known to be more dangerous than any other night of the year" in terms of sexual offenses, said division spokeswoman Elizabeth Bartholomew. She said 90 percent of child molestation crimes are committed by relatives, friends or people the minors know. "But it is the only night of the year when children are wandering around outside their homes, some of them unsupervised. We do it to protect the public and to protect the offenders themselves."

Such Halloween checks are becoming more common across the country, with Virginia jurisdictions and the District participating, too.

Many of the offenders are forbidden from contact with minors as a part of their probation or parole orders, she said, and having a string of young visitors could land them in trouble even if they mean no harm. Probation officers enforce the no-Halloween rules just as they direct offenders to avoid schools on their routes to work and to shop at grocery stores when children are home sleeping, Bartholomew said.

"This keeps the offender from having accidental contact with a child," she said. "It helps them control their own reactions."

In the District, court officials conduct Halloween spot checks to try to ensure that sex offenders have no contact with children, said Leonard Sipes of the Court Services and Offender Supervision Agency. In some cases, they use Global Positioning System devices to monitor them.

In Virginia, local probation offices choose between two initiatives: Alexandria, Fairfax and Arlington counties participate in a Porch Lights Out program, which mandates that offenders keep their houses dark between dusk and about 9 p.m. and not open the door to trick-or-treaters. Manassas and Prince William County require offenders to attend meetings with police officers and therapists.

"It's just to keep them off the street during the hours of trick-or-treat," said Larry Traylor of the Virginia Department of Corrections.

Maryland began its program last year after the General Assembly required that "containment teams" monitor and control sex offenders in every county. There are about 4,000 registered

sex offenders in the state, about half of them under court supervision. The agency has no control over those no longer under court supervision.

The American Civil Liberties Union of Maryland declined to comment on the Halloween program.

For probation and parole agents, the Halloween programs mean two whirlwind nights canvassing the homes of each child sex offender in their caseloads, said John Hafer of the division's Montgomery County office. The offenders considered to be the highest risks will receive more than one visit.

With his laptop and a partner, Hafer will drop by unannounced at 30 houses, checking first that the porch is dark and pumpkin-free. Halloween decorations are forbidden. Usually, the offenders are happy to comply, Hafer said.

"They fully understand that all somebody has to do is point a finger and accuse them of something and suddenly they are in a very difficult position," he said.

The extra checks can sometimes catch offenders unaware: A recent police sweep in Howard County revealed that one registrant had fled and that another was living at an unauthorized address.

Nor are offenders' families allowed to have Halloween at home. One of Hafer's most difficult cases is a child sex offender who lives with his wife and young daughter. The mother and daughter can go trick-or-treating, but their house must remain dark and uninviting, with the door unanswered.

"I've explained to him that his wife and child are going to make the best of it that they can," Hafer said. "It's very hard to explain all this to a young girl."

Some agents gather the sex offenders in their charge for group therapy meetings. Hafer cites an agent in Washington County who "invited" all of his offenders to a Halloween party. "They were all accounted for because they were all in his office," he said.